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The Little-Changed Merritt: 'Queen of the Parkways' — Cameron on Transportation

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Remaining unchanged is sometimes a good thing. After all, Connecticut is the “land of steady habits.”

Those were my thoughts one day driving through the spring foliage on The Merritt — “Queen of the Parkways.” What an amazing road.

A century ago, Route 1 — Post Road — was the only way to [drive between New York and Boston](#). If you think traffic is bad now, imagine that journey.

So in 1936, two thousand men began working on the state’s largest public works project — the \$21 million

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four-lane parkway starting in Greenwich and running to the Housatonic River in Stratford. The adjoining [Wilbur Cross Parkway](#) didn't open until years later when the [Sikorsky Bridge](#) across the Housatonic was completed.

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The Merritt, named after Stamford resident, Congressman Schuyler Merritt, is best known for its natural beauty, though most of it isn't native. A total of 22,000 trees and 40,000 shrubs were planted along the highway. And then there are the amazing bridges that have been listed since 1991 on the National Register of Historic Places.

Architect George Dunkleberger designed [69 bridges](#) in a variety of architectural styles, from Art Moderne to Deco to Rustic. No two bridges are exactly alike. It didn't take long for The Merritt to be hailed "The Queen of Parkways."

The parkway initially had three tolls — a dime that was later raised to 35 cents — to finance its extension to Hartford via the Wilbur Cross Parkway, named after Wilbur Lucius Cross who was governor in the 1930s. Tolls were dropped in 1988.

The [old toll booths](#) were as unique as the parkway, constructed of wooden beams and covered in shingles. One of the original booths is still preserved in Stratford at Boothe Memorial Park. There's also a [nearby museum](#) (just off exit 53), highlighting the parkway's construction and history.

The Merritt's right of way is a half-mile wide. The vistas are more obvious since massive tree clearing after the two storms in 2011 and 2012 when downed trees pretty much closed the highway.

Since its design and opening in 1938, commercial vehicles and trucks have been prohibited from the parkway. But as traffic worsens on I-95, debates often rage about allowing trucks on the Merritt and possibly widening the road. Either move would likely mean demolishing the parkway's historic bridges, so don't expect such expansion anytime soon.

The best watchdog of the parkway's preservation is the [Merritt Parkway Conservancy](#), which has fought to keep the road's unique character.

The group won a [court battle](#) in 2007 against state Department of Transportation plans for a massive Los Angeles-like cloverleaf interchange where the Merritt meets Route 7. The group's latest battle is against plans for a multiuse trail along the south side of the roadway. Costing an estimated [\\$6.6 million per mile](#), the Conservancy worries the trees and foliage that would be cleared to allow bike and pedestrian users would despoil the ecosystem.

So for now, the best and only way to enjoy The Merritt is from your car. This is one road where bumper-to-bumper traffic can actually give you time to appreciate the incredible natural and man-made beauty.

Jim Cameron on Highways

- [What You Can Learn by Riding with a State Trooper on I-95: Cameron on Transportation](#) (June 18)
- [A Vehicle Miles Tax Is Needed to Maintain CT Roads: Cameron on Transportation](#) (June 16)
- [Highway Speeds, Fuel Feeds, Safety Needs: Cameron on Transportation](#) (May 8)
- [Why We Should Have Highway Tolls — What State Leaders Aren't Telling You: Cameron on Transportation](#) (April 14)
- [Looking to Save the State Money? Stop Spending on Sound Barriers: Cameron on Transportation](#) (Jan. 27)
- [How a 10% ConnDOT Cut Would Affect Connecticut: Cameron on Transportation](#) (Jan. 20)
- [Predictions for Planes, Trains & Automobile Traffic in 2017: Cameron on Transportation](#) (Jan. 14)
- [Don't Blame the Trucks for I-95 Congestion: Cameron on Transportation](#) (Nov. 12, 2016)

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